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ABSTRACT

Self-evaluation is thought to play a major role in personality and motivation. Preliminary experience with success or failure, levels of aspiration, attributions for performance, and locus of control may all be interrelated factors in human motivation. After receiving success, failure, or no feedback on a concept formation task, subjects (N=90) were asked what level of performance they anticipated on a subsequent test and the extent to which they attributed their previous performance to ability, effort, luck, or task difficulty. All subjects also completed Rotter's scale for belief in internal/external control of reinforcement. Subjects in the successful group had a higher level of aspiration than those given no feedback; both groups predicted higher scores than did subjects who experienced preliminary failure. Individuals who succeeded tended to attribute their performance to ability and effort, whereas those who failed tended to choose luck and task difficulty. Individuals who were given no feedback on the task generally followed their internal or external personality dispositions in making task attributions. The findings suggest that, when working on a novel task, individuals tend to use their present performance to determine their level of aspiration. (Author/NRB)

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ASPIRATIONS, ATTRIBUTIONS, AND LOCUS OF CONTROL

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Aspirations, Attributions, and Locus of Control

One's evaluation of oneself is generally agreed to play a major role in personality and motivation. Level of aspiration studies have provided one important area in which to probe some of the personal, environmental, and social factors which influence self-evaluations and self-expectations.

The typical sequence of events in such studies is as follows: The subject is given a task to perform and is then asked to state what level of performance will be attained in the next attempt. The difference between these scores provides an index of the subject's level of aspiration (for example, whether it is high or low, realistic or unrealistic). If the individual now performs the task again, the difference between the new performance and the level of aspiration is called the "attainment discrepancy", which is positive if the attainment is higher than the level of aspiration and negative if the attainment is lower than the level of aspiration. The resulting feelings of success or failure, respectively, are likely to modify the individual's level of aspiration. Frequently, the attainment discrepancy is experimentally manipulated by providing explicit success or failure feedback following the subject's very first attempt at a task. Two common findings of such studies are that success raises and failure lowers one's level of aspiration (Feather & Saville, 1967; Festinger, 1942; Lachman,

1961; Zajonc & Brickman, 1969) and that individuals often optimistically set their level of aspiration higher than their previous level of actual achievement (Desoto, Coleman, & Putnam, 1969; Simon, Shaw, & Gilchrest, 1954).

Closely related to work on level of aspiration is research on attributions for task performance. According to Weiner et al. (1971), individuals may attribute their successes or failures to any of four causal elements: ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. The first two elements, ability and effort, are conceptualized as "internal" and the last two, task difficulty and luck, as "external" in the same sense in which Rotter (1966) distinguished between internal vs. external locus of control. Furthermore, ability and task difficulty are regarded as relatively "fixed" elements which remain fairly constant over time, whereas effort and luck are described as "variable" elements.

Weiner (1974) has reviewed a number of studies demonstrating that people generally attribute their success experiences to internal factors and their failure experiences to external ones (see also Miller, 1976). Additionally, as noted above, expectancies of future performance tend to increase following success and decrease following failure. Over a series of repeated failure experiences, people who are inclined to attribute their performance to stable factors show lower levels of aspiration than people not so inclined; conversely, people inclined to attribute their performance to variable factors show higher levels of aspiration

than people not so inclined. On skill tasks, where stable factors would be anticipated to contribute most to performance, people become progressively more confident of their expectancies over trials whereas on chance tasks this progressive increase in confidence is not observed (Wollert, 1979). One methodological shortcoming in past research on level of aspiration (with the notable exception of Zajonc & Brickman, 1969) and even the most recent work on attributions for task performance (see Touhey & Villemez, 1980) is the absence of a no feedback control group which might serve as a baseline condition for the groups receiving success or failure feedback.

Researchers have also studied the effect of personality traits on level of aspiration and attributions for performance. One of these is need for achievement (see Weiner, 1974; Touhey & Villemez, 1980) and another is locus of control. Weiner (1974) has argued that the personality trait of locus of control has little effect on expectancies of success and that it is instead the attribution of one's successful or unsuccessful past performance to stable or unstable factors which has the clearest relationship to level of aspiration. Even so, some researchers continue to be interested in exploring the relationships between locus of control, task attributions, and motivation for performance (e.g., Gregory, 1978).

The present study had three purposes: First, to replicate earlier research which found that subjects had higher levels of

aspiration following success rather than failure and that successful subjects tended to attribute their performance to internal factors and unsuccessful subjects to external ones. Second, to add to the traditional success-failure manipulation a no feedback control condition which would provide baseline data on naturally-occurring levels of aspiration and attributions for performance. Third, to examine once again the possible relationships between the personality dimension of locus of control and level of aspiration as well as attributions for performance.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 45 male and 45 female undergraduates whose participation fulfilled a course requirement in introductory psychology at California State University, Sacramento.

Procedure

Subjects worked at a complex concept formation task which provided little if any objective feedback regarding their performance. Self-perceptions of performance were instead manipulated by means of false feedback given to three randomly-selected groups, each comprising 15 males and 15 females. The Success group was told it had correctly identified the concept on 16 out of 20 trials. The Failure group was told it had identified the concept on 4 out of 20 trials, and a No Feedback group simply performed the task with no indication of its rate of success.

After the concept formation task, subjects in all groups were asked to predict how many trials out of 20 they thought they would get correct on a subsequent, similar task. After making their predictions, subjects were given a form which listed four causal factors (effort, ability, task difficulty, and luck) and were instructed to indicate the extent to which each may have contributed to their performance, using a scale ranging from 0 (not a cause) to 9 (very much a cause).

Finally, all subjects completed Rotter's (1966) scale for belief in internal vs. external control of reinforcement. They were then given an explanation of the purposes of the experiment and the deception employed in administering and providing feedback for the concept formation task. After being given an opportunity to ask questions, each was sworn to secrecy for the duration of the project, thanked for his or her participation, and released.

RESULTS

Exploratory analyses turned up no reliable main effects for or interactions with the sex of subject variable. Consequently, only the combined data for males and females will be presented in this report.

Level of Aspiration

Level of aspiration was measured by the number of trials out of twenty the subject predicted he or she would get correct on a concept formation test similar to the one just taken. The mean number of correct guesses predicted was found to differ

significantly between the Success (M = 14.77), No Feedback (M = 9.63), and Failure (M = 5.73) groups. Planned comparisons revealed that each of these means differed significantly from the others (F = 71.19, 2/87 df, $p < .01$).

Attributions for Performance

The task attribution data are shown in Table 1. A Group x Attribution repeated measures analysis of variance found significant effects for Group (F = 3.61, 2/87 df, $p < .05$), Attribution

Insert Table 1 about here

(F = 5.20, 3/261 df, $p < .01$), and the interaction between the two (F = 7.15, 6/261 df, $p < .01$).

Tests for simple effects on the Group factor were significant for the Success group (F = 3.30, 3/261 df, $p < .05$) and Failure group (F = 15.76, 3/261 df, $p < .01$) but not for the No Feedback group ($F < 1$). These tests show that the members of the Success and Failure groups did not attribute their performance equally to the four factors but emphasized some significantly more than others. Specifically, the Success group emphasized ability and effort attributions while the Failure group emphasized luck and task difficulty. Unlike their counterparts in the Success and Failure conditions, subjects in the No Feedback group revealed no clear preferences for either internal or external factors in their task attributions.

Locus of Control

The degree to which subjects indicated a belief in external

control of reinforcement on the Rotter (1966) I-E scale was correlated with their level of aspiration and attributions for task performance within each of the three experimental conditions. Externality was unrelated to level of aspiration within the Success (r = -.02) and Failure (r = -.07) conditions. There was a weak negative correlation between externality and level of aspiration for subjects in the No Feedback group (r = -.20). While the latter result was statistically very marginal (z = 1.10, p = .28), it suggests, as one would expect, that externals tended to have lower levels of aspiration than internals.

More interesting and statistically reliable results were found when externality was correlated with task attributions. These data are shown in Table 2. The correlations were nonsignificant within the Success and Failure groups, but for the No

Insert Table 2 about here

Feedback group there was a significant negative relationship between externality and attributions to ability. Tests for significance between correlations were performed by means of Fisher r to Z transformations (Hays, 1963, pp. 530-533). For the Success and Failure groups, there were no reliable differences between correlations for each of the four types of attributions. In the No Feedback group, there were reliable differences between ability vs. luck attributions (z = 3.27, $p < .01$), ability vs. task difficulty attributions (z = 2.38, $p < .05$), and effort vs. luck

attributions ($z = 2.63$, $p < .05$). This analysis shows that externals are more likely to choose luck and task difficulty as attributions and less likely to choose ability and effort attributions under conditions of ambiguous feedback.

It will be recalled from the introduction that Weiner (1974) believes attributions of performance to stable or unstable factors have a stronger relationship with level of aspiration than does locus of control. As a test of this idea, subjects' scores on the ability and task difficulty measures were combined to form an index of stable attributions while scores on effort and luck were combined to form an index of unstable attributions. Stable and unstable attributions were then correlated with level of aspiration. Within the Success condition, neither stable nor unstable factors were correlated with aspirations ($rs = -.019$ and $-.084$, respectively). Within the Failure condition, however, stable attributions had a negative relationship with aspirations ($r = -.278$) while for unstable attributions the relationship was positive ($r = +.144$). Neither of these correlations differed significantly from zero, but they did differ reliably from one another ($z = 2.29$, $p < .02$). In the No Information Condition, both stable and unstable factors were negatively but non-significantly related to aspirations ($r = -.138$ and $-.231$, respectively).

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the results of earlier research, the foregoing findings indicate that when working on a task, especially a novel

task on which there is little past experience to draw from, individuals use their present performance to determine their level of aspiration. When they are successful on a trial they are likely to predict future success, and when they are unsuccessful they are likely to predict future failure. In the present study, a control group which received no feedback on its initial performance (something of an innovation in this area of research) was rather noncommittal and predicted a mediocre future performance.

Also in line with past work was the finding that the Success, Failure, and No Feedback groups differed in their attributions for task performance. As anticipated, members of the Success group attributed their performance more to internal factors (i.e., ability and effort) and members of the Failure group more to external factors (i.e., luck and task difficulty). These results provide one more indication that individuals have generalized defensive attributions about failure and strive to protect their egos by not inferring that person qualities are responsible for an unsuccessful performance and instead blaming environmental factors over which they have little personal control. A successful performance, on the other hand, is more likely to be ascribed to internal factors, which would obviously be an ego-enhancing sort of attribution. A performance for which feedback is ambiguous seems to produce a wait-and-see attitude that expresses no clear preference for either internal or external task attributions.

Individual differences in personality appear to have had a significant influence on attributions only under conditions of ambiguous feedback. Namely, the more "external" the subject's personality the less likely he or she was to attribute task performance to ability and effort (internal factors) and the more likely to attribute performance to luck and task difficulty (external factors). When subjects' task performance was instead clearly labeled as successful or unsuccessful, however, this feedback overrode individual differences in personality as a determinant of their short-term internal vs. external attributions. Davis and Davis (1972), on the other hand, reported that, following a clear-cut failure experience, externals were significantly more likely than internals to attribute their performance to bad luck. Across both success and failure experiences, **externals** attached more importance to luck. Davis and Davis employed a median split on the I-E dimension so as to categorize their subjects as "internals" or "externals". Use of the same procedure in our research produced no reliable effects for the internal-external factor on level of aspiration or attributions for task performance. Our significant findings for the I-E dimension emerged in correlational analyses. Even so, our results parallel those of Davis and Davis in most respects.

To sum up the results for locus of control, we replicated Weiner's (1974) observation that this personality trait has little direct relationship to expectations for success (though there was

a weak negative correlation between externality and level of aspiration in the No Feedback condition). We also replicated the work of other investigators, however, in finding that externality is significantly related to attributions for task performance, at least under conditions of ambiguous feedback. Furthermore, we did not observe that attributions to stable factors had a positive correlation with level of aspiration in any of the three treatment conditions. This represents a failure to replicate a finding that Weiner regards as derivable from his theoretical model. More compatible with this model was our observation that attributions to unstable factors were positively correlated with level of aspiration in the Failure condition. Thus, the persons who failed seemed to be reassuring themselves that, since insufficient effort or bad luck had undermined their past efforts, they would surely be able to do better in the future.

Despite Weiner's reservations regarding the conceptual adequacy of the internal-external construct, locus of control does appear to be an important factor in personality and task performance. Samuel (1980) found externality to be negatively correlated with IQ (r = -.32) across black, white, male, and female subgroups even when individual differences in socioeconomic status were controlled for. Further research may shed more light on the mechanisms by which "externals" develop environmentally-oriented attributions that may in turn lower their level of aspiration and undermine their future performance. Hiroto (1974) and Dweck (1975) have related externality

and externally-oriented attributions for performance to the phenomenon of "learned helplessness", in which an organism's motivation to cope with environmental contingencies is drastically diminished by preliminary exposure to uncontrollable aversive stimulation (see Seligman, 1975). Both Dweck and Seligman have explored possible therapies for learned helplessness, which mainly involve convincing the individual that he or she really can influence contingencies that at first seem uncontrollable. As more is learned about the interrelationships between preliminary experience with success or failure, levels of aspiration, attributions for performance, and belief in internal vs. external control of reinforcement, refinements will no doubt be suggested for existing models of human motivation.

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Table 1

Task Attributions Made by Subjects in the Success, Failure, and No Feedback Groups.

Attributional Variable	Group: Success	Failure	No Feedback
Ability	5.233	1.867	4.533
Effort	6.600	3.933	4.833
Luck	4.767	5.767	5.167
Task Difficulty	4.733	5.967	4.467

Note: For each attributional variable, the scale ranged from 0 (not a cause) to 9 (very much a cause).

Table 2

Correlations Between Externality and Task Attributions Made by Subjects in the Success, Failure, and No Feedback Groups.

Attributional Variable	Group		
	Success	Failure	No Feedback
Ability	.034	.248	-.412*
Effort	-.014	-.074	-.306
Luck	.212	.115	.188
Task Difficulty	-.082	-.250	.020

*p <